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AUTHOR Davis, Irma
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ABSTRACT

The Writer's Center at Elgin Community College (Illinois) was established to provide students, writers, and would-be-writers with an opportunity to share and discuss common problems and successes in writing. The group holds meetings and invites local writers, editors, and others to address them. Members are encouraged to read short stories, articles, and excerpts from books they are writing. When writings are published, colleagues and members are honored. The center received so much praise and enthusiasm that the group decided to offer a writer's conference in the Spring of 1981. Applicants were accepted on the basis of the manuscripts they submitted and each workshop was restricted to no more than 15 members. The conference began with a Friday night lecture from the workshop leaders and continued with workshops, classes, and readings of professional and student writing until Saturday afternoon. The enthusiastic response to the conference resulted in repeated conferences in 1982 and 1983. Although the conferences encompass a great deal of work and are not without their difficulties, their history of success prompts the staff into planning for another one. (HOD)

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Irma Davis
Elgin Community College

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"The Rewards and Tribulations of Meeting the Writing Needs of Untraditional Students in Advanced Composition"

PRESENTATION BY IRMA DAVIS
CONFERENCE ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION
SHERATON CENTRE, NEW YORK CITY
ANNUAL MEETING - MARCH 29-31, 1984

In the Spring of 1980, the dean of our division, D. Gail Shadwell, placed a small announcement in our local newspaper inviting writers and would-be writers to meet at our college. She requested members of the English Department to attend the evening meeting so that we would be able to advise our visitors of the composition courses we offered in remedial and college composition as well as in journalism, advanced narrative and creative writing.

We were astonished when seventy-five people appeared. It was quite an emotional affair as people who had known each other as neighbors and from civic activities discovered that they had a common interest in writing. It was also apparent that we had reached a more sophisticated populace than we had anticipated.

A survey that we had prepared revealed that 12% had no more than a high school education, 40% had attended college, 25% had a college degree, 23% had a graduate degree, 20% had published and their publications ranged from a novel to an article in the local newspapers.

Excited at finding themselves together and with such common interests, they asked if the college could provide them with the opportunity to meet regularly. They

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were interested in discussing with one another the problems that they faced as writers and would-be writers. They were also, they said, eager to meet editors, published writers and agents and obtain advice about writing and information about the matket place. About ½ said that they were primarily interested in writing fiction, ¼ expressed interest in non-fiction and ¼ were interested in poetry. Some also expressed interest in drama. Several were involved in more than one genre of writing.

After considerable effort that involved coordinating our community services, English department, publicity department and Student activities and by obtaining the support of the Vice-president of Instruction, we were allowed a small budget and enabled to start a Writer's Center. We hold meetings, about four a semester, and schedule local writers, editors, to address us. We also honor all colleagues and members who publish books. We also allow members to read short stories and articles and excerpts from books they are writing, and these sessions have proven to be the most popular of all. Our members have a hunger for an audience.

In addition to the Writer's Center members, my advanced narrative and Creative writing classes often attend the Writer's Center meetings. My classes are provided with a larger audience for their writing as well as extra instruction from professionals. My students not only become more enthusiastic about writing, but they become more aware of and respectful of the craftmanship that writing requires.

Our Writer's Center members expressed interest in our running a Writer's Conference. They wanted to immerse themselves for a weekend in writing. At that time, in 1981, there were no regularaly held and reasonably priced Writer's Conferences in Northern Illinois.

After enormous amount of labor, my colleague, Blossom Wohl and I were able to offer our first Writer's Conference in the Spring of 1981. We had Harry Mark Petrakis conduct our fiction workshop, Diana Wakowski, poetry, and Julie Amper, at that time, senior editor of children's literature at Macmillan, Children's Literature. The applicants were accepted on the basis of the manuscripts they submitted and each workshop was restricted to no more than 15 members. The conference began with a Friday night lecture from the workshop leaders and it continued with workshops, classes and readings of the professionals and student writing until Saturday afternoon.

We have held four Writer's Conferences and I shall be returning to select the participants of our April Conference.

Our latest survey reveals that the participants at the conference are among the more sophisticated of our Writer's Center members. 12% have attended college, 63% have college degrees, 25% have MA degrees or higher. Their occupations were: 42% Educators, 26% Business, 16% Homemakers, 2% Writers, 1% Health, 13% Students.

They not only differ from my advanced narrative and creative writing students in being more mature and, of course, more educated but also in having subjects

that they know a great deal about and want to write about. My students are hunting for their material outside of their lives and initially most of them will write quite imitative, poor versions of the popular books they read and television shows they like.

The Conference people, for the most part, like my students, lack a literary knowledge. I am amazed at the number of people who want to write but who don't care to read, much less study literature.

They lack sound, critical judgment. They can have good passages, and even moving passages, but they are completely capable of digressing into explanatory passages, needlessly breaking scenes and pointlessly shifting viewpoint. They don't know their craft of writing.

Many of the adults expect to publish immediately and have quite unrealistic notions about the publishing world. As an instructor one has considerable power in the classroom. One can cajole, inspire and browbeat a student into learning.

I have been concerned about the Writer's Center and Conference participants. I certainly didn't want to give them false encouragement, nor did I want to seem to be condoning and accepting serious flaws in writing.

My students have been of considerable assistance. They have tended as they have learned to offer criticism at the Writer's Center readings of members manuscripts.

The workshop leaders, no matter how different their personalities, have proven

to be of amazing reliability in evaluating and criticizing writings. The conference participant, flattered at having been allowed to attend the conference and at being counselled by a professional writer or editor, is able to accept criticism and learn far more that I should have anticipated.

The Writer's Center and the Conferences seem to provide some of the participants with a gracious avenue for returning to the classroom. All but one of the students who took non-credit courses in fiction and in children's literature had attended our Writer's Conference. There is a great overlapping of students taking our credit and non-credit courses.

My students who attend the Writer's Conference, return to class quite ready to revise and even rewrite their stories one more time. Hearing the same principles they learned in class said by a professional writer impresses the student far more than hours and hours of additional classroom teaching could have achieved.

Our conference leaders assure me that the writing of our participants compares favorably with that of other conferences.

The Conference is quite popular. 1/3 of the conferees from 1981 returned in 1982. 1/7 returned in 1983. 1/3 of the 1982 conferees returned in 1983. We receive such evaluations as:

"Well organized as usual"

"Choice of leaders outstanding"

"Discussions and reading informative"

"The highlight of the conference is being able to spend

time with people who like to talk about writing and are honestly interested in other writers."

"I hope the conferences continue forever"

"The various workshops and fellowship with other writers has been of immeasurable help"

"I found the sessions with Flora Schreiber extremely constructive and personally rewarding"

"It's a comfort to be encouraged in your effort by such warm and generous people"

"I feel I have made some wonderful new friends"

They are full of praise.

One of the members of our Children's Literature Workshop, Charlotte Graeber, had her book MUSTARD purchased by her workshop leader, Julie Amper who was Senior Editor of Macmillian. She has had another book purchased THE THING IN KAT'S ATTIC by Julie Amper who is now with Dutton. We were able to be of considerable assistance to Marje Miller and helped her get her book Nancy Abbot's Picture Book Dolls published with Hobby House. She is currently writing a sequel for the same company. We also have published a number of the conference participants short stories in our college's literary magazine SPIRE.

The enthusiasm of the participants at the Writer's Center and Writer's Conference has to be balanced by my exhaustion. Planning and supervising Writer's Center Meetings and the Writer's Conference and sponsoring a literary magazine are all quite demanding and exacting functions. I daily compose lists of the necessary steps that must sequentially be conducted. The length of these lists appalls me. It is so easy to omit a necessary step. It is so

likely that the typesetting won't be done on schedule, that errors in the proof will not be detected, that the publicity will not be printed in the newspaper, that the third class mail will be inordinately delayed, that checks for the guest speakers will not be issued on time. Every one of the seemingly innumerable steps is subject to omission, delays and errors. My colleague and I are expected to meet all our duties pertaining to the Writer's Center, by being allowed one released class each semester. We teach four sections.

Conducting a small weekend conference somehow puts us in the role of a motel keeper. A guest ordered me to look at leaks in the ceiling and another to look at a plugged up drain in the bathtub. I have been awakened in the night by a guest who wanted extra blankets. I have been asked to exchange a soft mattress for a firmer one.

The bed fell apart of our workshop leader and I was summoned by her to examine the bed frame, the mattress and boxspring that were in crazily different places from one another. My protests that all complaints were to be addressed to the management seemed to be of no avail. My colleague and I are known to the participants and we are summoned.

Another inherent difficulty in running the conference consists in obtaining support and funding from the various entities of the college, particularly from the student activities budget. Our student government is elected each fall. The new officers have minimal understanding of the commitments that their predecessors' have made and often attempt to and sometimes succeed

in cutting our budget. By the time they are educated to our Writer's Center programs and vote us money for next year, they are out of office and we have to contend with a new senate and a new set of officers.

At this time of the year, with the most hectic part of the conference still before me, sanity dictates that I should not agree to be a coordinator again. Even freshmen composition courses seem like a haven of reliability in contrast to running a Writer's Center and Writer's Conference. Each year,however, the success of the conference, the contagion of the enthusiasm of the participants has launched me into the next year's work.